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Money and influence: philanthropies, intermediary organisations, and Atlanta's 2017 school board election

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ABSTRACT

National philanthropies have recently played a prominent role in spending on U.S. urban school board elections, largely seeking to promote candidates who support charter schools. In Atlanta in 2017, 30 candidates competed for nine open school board seats. One practice has been to fund intermediary organisations (IOs) (e.g. advocacy groups, foundations) that disseminate information and research in an effort to shape public opinion. This paper analyses the role of IOs in the 2017 school board race in Atlanta. Drawing on 12 interviews with policymakers and IO representatives, analysis of campaign literature, and media accounts, the authors contrast the ways in which the intermediary and philanthropic sectors attempted to influence leaders' framing of educational policy issues. Findings reveal a nascent capacity for IOs in Atlanta for shaping support for pro-charter board candidates. The paper discusses implications for understanding the role that IOs may play in the politics of urban education.

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Over the past several years, there has been increased attention in the politics of education to the role of philanthropies in the politics of urban board elections (Reckhow et al. 2017; Henig, Jacobsen, and Reckhow 2019). There has similarly been attention to the role that intermediary organisations play in disseminating research and information to policymakers about 'incentivist' educational policies such as charter schools in urban contexts (Scott and Holme 2016), as well as new studies of how national philanthropies are funding charter management organisations, or CMOs (Ferrare and Setari 2018; Quinn, Oelberger, and Meyerson 2016; Scott 2015).

In this paper, we draw on a framework from our study of the politics of research used by policymakers, and the role of networks of intermediary organisations (referred to hereafter as IOs). Appendix A shows the relationship between IOs and foundations as our team has conceptualised it (Scott and Jabbar 2014). Rather than view philanthropies as being in a separate category from intermediaries, we instead have chosen to view the political relationship as one of 'a hub and spokes', since many philanthropies, both national and local, play a role of funding newer organisations, and serve not only a

funding role, but also convening, organising, and advocacy roles on the behalf of the IOs they fund. These smaller IOs in turn increasingly play a policy-oriented function in urban contexts, including disseminating information and/or research to policymakers, or actual policy advocacy. Further, this framework understands policy making to be informed by policy networks involving myriad actors, including interest groups, public policymakers, private foundations and donors, teachers, teachers unions, school and system leaders, taxpayers, and universities operating in urban political ecologies that share similarities, but also differ on key characteristics and democratic processes (Scott et al. 2018).

The research focus we engage with in this case is how local and national intermediary organisations and philanthropies interacted with local politics in Atlanta, Georgia, a southeastern city with a history of racially segregated schools and that was recovering from a crisis of confidence in its schools in the 2017 school board election. We pose the following questions about the role of philanthropies and other IOs in Atlanta:

- (1) Which national and local organisations, or networks of organisations, were most active in their donations, and/or influential in the outcomes? Were there any patterns of involvement?
- (2) How do local organisational leaders and policymakers characterise the politics driving philanthropic involvement in the school board election? What were the particular reforms or policies (i.e. charter schools, etc.) that philanthropies sought to influence most?
- (3) How did national and local organisations' involvement appear to be complementary to, or in conflict with, local civic capacity to address education (i.e. Stone et al. 2001)?

To answer these questions, we first consider the context of philanthropic activity to support market-based reform in education, particularly how national organisations become involved in local politics; the relevant political context; and how civic capacity in urban politics is related to understanding the effects of networks.

Research context

This study lies at the intersection of several lines of research on urban education policy: philanthropic donations to candidates in school board races in districts serving predominantly Black and Latinx students; philanthropic activity to support market-based reforms; and how market-based reforms may affect 'civic capacity', or the collective capacity to address problems, in urban education.

Research on external donor influence on local school board elections is relatively new. In their study of two school board election cycles in four cities, Reckhow et al. (2017) found 'that outside donors are competing with unions in local school board elections ... some reform groups have portrayed their efforts as intended to counter the traditional insider role of teacher unions' (796). National organisations, they point out (along with Marsh and Wohlstetter 2013), have an interest in being able to point to successes of various reforms in local settings. They contend that 'local arenas can serve as important battlegrounds in national politics—penetrated by networks of outside organisations and

donors who see local elections as critical contests over competing visions of education’ (Reckhow et al. 2017, 784).

While this research has advanced our knowledge of the range and scope of philanthropic investment in urban school board elections, it has, as yet, not engaged the racial dynamics and politics of such investments, to date leaving unattended the historical and enduring tensions raised when white, wealthy organisations stand to shape schooling in districts serving Black and Latinx students. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the racial politics of philanthropic involvement in public education, we draw from work that centres race and power (Scott 2009; Anderson and Dixon 2016). This research has situated and examined the multiple ideological motivations for philanthropic investment in urban schooling in light of the rise of neo-liberal tenets that regard the role of the state in public education to be one of contractor for educational services, rather than provider, and the belief that the private sector is better situated to provide effective, equitable schooling yoked to parental choices in schools (Rooks 2017).

Another line of recent research on urban education policy has revealed how foundations are funding organisations to implement or advocate for urban market-based reforms, and are often also funding researchers to determine these reforms’ effectiveness (Scott 2009; Scott et al. 2016; Lubienski, Scott, and DeBray 2014; Scott and Jabbar 2014; Welsh and Hall 2018). Foundations and IOs are increasingly playing a ‘brokering’ role in policymaking outside of traditional intergovernmental systems (Ball and Junemann 2012).

How external organisations’ involvement interfaces with local politics, specifically the collective ‘civic capacity’ for various sectors of the community to come together to solve problems, is also a key question for our study (Stone et al. 2001, 4). One previous relevant study of this dimension was conducted by Simon, Gold, and Cucchiara (2011), who, in their case study of privatisation in education in Philadelphia over a seven-year period, found that market-based reforms ‘undermined opportunities for meaningful public engagement’ that were needed to set policy goals for education (278). To date, there have been few studies that have asked policymakers and members of local IOs directly about their perceptions of *how* and *whether* outside involvement may have made a difference in local electoral processes and outcomes. In addition, in contrast to other school systems recently studied, Atlanta’s teachers are non-unionised, which adds a political factor to explore.

Politics of race and segregation

Although Atlanta was referred to as ‘the city too busy to hate’ during the height of the mid-century civil rights movement, given its relatively moderate business community’s tolerance of some civil rights demands, such a moniker obscures deep historical and persistent segregation. The context of education reform in Atlanta is not complete without discussion of its history of racism, racial divisions, and the effects of this on governance and policy. Mark Pendergrast (2017) refers to Atlanta as a tale of two cities: ‘the racial divide remains an often unspoken aspect of every other issue facing the city’ (63). Although a centre of the civil rights movement and a predominantly liberal bastion compared with other Southern cities, education, medical care, housing, transportation, and other services in Atlanta continue to be plagued by inequality, despite having an

African-American mayor since 1974. Pendergrast quotes David Sjoquist's 2000 book, *The Atlanta paradox*: 'Atlanta is an interesting case for investigating the causes of urban inequality. It is a city that presents a paradox of phenomenal growth in contrast to the unexpected high level of inner-city poverty and economic stagnation, and of a black mecca in contrast to the unexpected high level of segregation' (63).

The prevailing levels of school segregation across the Atlanta metropolitan area have their roots in two major political and legal developments of the early 1970s. These were the 'Atlanta compromise' of 1973, which was the settlement of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) desegregation suit; and the failure of the later *Armour v. Nix* litigation after 1974, which, if it had been successful, would have mandated metropolitan-wide busing (Brown-Nagin 2011). The 'Atlanta compromise' avoided large-scale busing to integrate the Atlanta Public Schools; White elites and many members of the African-American middle class came to an agreement that instead, White teachers would move to city schools and African-American teachers to the suburbs. As Brown-Nagin writes of the politics of the Atlanta compromise:

By the early 1970s, the school desegregation litigation had morphed into something much larger than a case about students and education: it had evolved into a controversy about political and economic power for the black middle class. Above all else, the determination of a vocal black middle class to secure its fair share of jobs in America's new racial landscape, where whites professed support for racial equality but still dominated the workplace and society at large, had overtaken the desegregation case. (2011, 404)

The *Armour* case was a suit brought on behalf of low-income African-American plaintiffs who sought the kind of metropolitan busing remedy that was ordered for Louisville, Kentucky and Wilmington, Delaware. The plaintiffs' attorneys, however, were facing the recent reality of the U.S. Supreme Court holding in the *Milliken v. Bradley* case; the judges did not find that the evidence of suburban discrimination in *Armour* was sufficiently strong. As Brown-Nagin (2011, 406) writes, 'Since the dawn of the modern civil rights era, a small group of Atlanta's black middle class had found politics and negotiation particularly fruitful approaches to solving problems associated with race and racism, and sometimes favoured it over civil rights litigation, as they endeavoured to cope with racial discrimination'. The result of the failure to find a metropolitan solution has been viewed by many as the source of continuing disinvestment from the Atlanta Public Schools. This historical context is vital to understanding the influx of philanthropic investment in the city school system, as it suggests why the Atlanta Public Schools is increasingly viewed by external donors as 'a good investment' (see Brown 2015).

The Atlanta metropolitan area is a comparative outlier with respect to its residents' economic isolation. Chetty et al. (2014), in their study of intergenerational economic mobility, found that Atlanta rated 48th out of 50 metropolitan areas in the United States in terms of residents' movement from the bottom to the top quintile of income level. The authors highlighted lack of political support for transportation in the metropolitan area connecting residents to jobs as a key factor.

The past decade has seen a steady growth of White residents in the city, and there are some neighbourhoods, such as Inman Park and the Old Fourth Ward, where schools have seen an uptick of White enrolment. The city is approximately 52 percent African-American residents, but in October 2018, the city schools enrolled approximately 73 percent

African-American and 16 percent White students (Georgia Department of Education 2019).

Clarence Stone, in a 2015 essay revisiting his work on regime politics in Atlanta from 25 years earlier, writes:

Although comparing Atlanta today with Atlanta at mid-twentieth century reveals change, a persisting pattern of steep inequality remains unbroken. Yet attacking that persistence is not a visible feature in the politics of governing the city currently. Why? The governing circle seems less tightly drawn than in the past, but the poor and disadvantaged have, if anything, become more scattered and marginalised ... Atlanta shows no signs of the kind of surge in progressive politics that many cities have displayed. (Stone 2015, para. 32)

Stone adds that in Atlanta, ‘the mix of a large governmental presence, a wide range of nonprofit organisations, and a sizeable ed-and-med sector has a potential that could yet be realised with careful attention to the collective impact they could have by acting in concert’ (2015, para. 37). For the purposes of the present study, this suggests that education philanthropies could make a difference if they act in concert with other philanthropies, as well as governments, on common education policy goals—something that he and his colleagues observed had not been accomplished previously in Atlanta (Stone et al. 2001, 13–16).

Methods, data, and analysis

Our sampling for this study was purposive (Patton 1990), as we sought to learn about a district in which CMO and philanthropic influence was newer than in comparative districts like Denver, Los Angeles, Memphis, Newark, New Orleans, and New York. Atlanta provided us with this site. This paper draws from interviews conducted in 2018 ($N = 12$). We posed questions to IO representatives about their organisation’s policy goals, funding, ideology, and mission. We asked them for information to talk about partner organisations and individuals with whom they work on specific efforts, but also for indications of groups or individuals holding divergent positions. We also asked about the context of reform in the aftermath of the school board elections, and their perceptions of the role of philanthropies, both national and local, in those elections. In interviews with policymakers, we asked about their agency’s or organisation’s connections to philanthropy and funders, and how they connect to policy priorities and/or partnerships to achieve common goals (Ball and Junemann 2012).

All interviews were transcribed. Our initial codes included: coalition, outside/local donor, national/local partner, civic capacity, and policymaker. We then identified emerging common themes across interviews. We drew on media accounts from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, as well as on financial disclosure data from Ballotpedia and Georgia Easy. We accessed board candidates’ written statements and YouTube videos collected and placed online during the campaign by the Georgia Coalition for Public Education. We used all of these varied sources in constructing the case (Yin 2009). A limitation is that some organisations were non-responsive to requests for interviews.

Atlanta public schools policy context, 2010–2017

The prelude to the present begins in 2010, during the nationally publicised Atlanta testing scandal, in which numerous school administrators were found to have aided students in

cheating on statewide standardised tests, and to have falsified test score sheets themselves. As Erica Turner (2017) writes:

Before revelations of cheating, the school district was an exemplar of ‘test-based accountability’ in the U.S. Under the then superintendent, Beverly Hall, the district had established an elaborate system of academic targets, sanctions, and pay-for-performance. Hall gained national recognition for her leadership in raising student achievement in a school district that predominantly served low-income and African American students, children who are among the most marginalised in the United States. (4)

The scandal received widespread national attention and teachers and administrators faced criminal prosecution. During the prosecution phase, in which administrators and teachers were indicted under state racketeering statutes, many national foundations that had enthusiastically invested in the district during the tenure of Atlanta Public Schools (APS) Superintendent Beverly Hall withdrew their support (T. Cairl, interview, February 19, 2018). African-American educators were punished and their schools discredited. This in turn paved the way for charters, investment, and the razing of public housing projects and replacement of them with mixed-income developments (Turner 2017; Robinson and Simonton 2019). Turner refers to the historic disinvestment in communities on the south-side that was an antecedent to being held accountable for the pressure of No Child Left Behind’s high-stakes testing as ‘the racialised political economy of cheating’ (2017, 26).

However, there would seemingly be a renaissance approximately four years later under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Meria Carstarphen, who took office in 2014 and sought to restore integrity and stability in the system (Mitchell 2017), as well as to broaden to a policy focus on education of the ‘whole child’ rather than solely on test scores. Of importance to the present study, Carstarphen also established an Office of School Partnerships, which was designed with the goal of having new philanthropic investments in APS be deliberate and well-coordinated (T. Cairl, interview, February 19, 2018). In September 2019, however, the school board voted to not renew Carstarphen’s contract, which was reported to be due in part to her provision of schools to be operated by charter management organisations.

Atlanta Public Schools has not fully rebounded from the scandal, either in terms of publicity or effects: in a study of APS and another district in which there was cheating on tests, Georgia State University economist Tim Sass and colleagues found that the schools with the highest concentrations of African-American students had the strongest rates of evidence of cheating, as well as math and reading scores that, on average, lagged their peers by a half-year or more. Sass’s team ‘also found preliminary evidence that students whose scores were manipulated by 10 or more changed answers became less likely to graduate from high school than those whose test scores were not altered at all’ (Mitchell 2017, para. 51). However, others point to increased civic engagement and transparency. Angela Orange, Managing Director of Teach for America Metro Atlanta and a newly elected school board member in suburban Marietta City, responded as follows when asked about the overall political climate for education in Atlanta:

I think folks care about it. The thing in Georgia, I think, there’s increased transparency every year around education. I think the state-released list, the media constantly reports on education, and I think that the climate is that folks know about it, the information’s very much out there, and people care about it, and they want to be informed. (interview, February 1, 2018)

In 2013, Atlantan journalist Anna Simonton was among the first to document the presence of philanthropic donations to school board candidates. Arthur Rock, a California billionaire, donated the maximum \$2,500 to three board candidates that year. Simonton noted: 'Rock is not the only name on the reports with financial power and a less than obvious connection to Atlanta Public Schools. Greg Penner of the Walmart empire, Dave Goldberg of the Sheryl Sandberg empire (they're married), and Kent Thiry of the DaVita kidney dialysis empire (it sounds inglorious, but he pulls in \$17 million annually), are among the names that had some Atlantans scratching their heads this election season' (2013, para 6). Outside donors targeted candidates Courtney English, Matt Westmoreland, Jason Esteves, and Eshé Collins in this race, due to their status as Teach For America alumni and their pro-charter school reform views (Simonton 2013, para 15).

Another set of policy developments affecting the district pertain to the failure of Governor Nathan Deal's proposal to create an 'Opportunity School District' (OSD) via a ballot referendum in November 2016. This initiative would have permitted the Governor to take control of low-performing schools away from local school boards and implement various interventions for them, including contracting out to charter management organisations. The referendum failed by a margin of 60–40 percent. Keep Georgia Schools Local was a broad umbrella group that united local communities, civil rights advocates, and education interest groups against the measure. These groups worked to advocate for local school boards to pass resolutions opposing the school takeover amendment (Welsh et al. 2019).

During the campaign, 53 school boards around the state (including some in conservative, largely White school districts that had no schools on the OSD list) passed such resolutions, as noted on Facebook. This resistance to state takeover has roots in the American tradition of local control, which for some southern adherents, lends itself to resistance to policies favoured by national foundations, such as state takeovers, school closures, and even school choice (Briffault 2004; Pierce 2018). Atlanta Public Schools refused to pass a resolution opposing the OSD. Instead, it implemented many of the charter management strategies anticipated as part of the OSD. Following the defeat of the OSD, Keep Georgia Schools Local became the Georgia Coalition for Public Education (GCPE), which is part of and receives support from a national network dedicated to an affirmative, equitable, evidence-based vision of a racially just, remodelled public education system. The network has produced the Community Schools Playbook (Partnership for the Future of Learning 2018). GCPE is currently co-chaired by the Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda and Public Education Matters Georgia, and is run by a steering committee of nine organisations.

In 2017, the state legislature, with input from many public education groups, secured HB 338, the 'First Priority Act'. This legislation strengthened the role of the Governor's Office of Student Achievement in intervention in low-performing schools. The APS had been developing its own turnaround strategy beginning in 2014 and approved it in 2016 – one of the first undertakings of the 2013-elected Board. As mentioned above, once the OSD was introduced, APS stepped up implementation of its strategy, which involved turning the management of several schools over to various charter management entities, including Kindezi, KIPP, and PurposeBuilt.

With the Board highly supportive of Superintendent Carstarphen's agenda, the 2017 races saw many of the incumbents running to retain their seats; they were largely successful in this bid. Leslie Grant, Eshé Collins, Byron Amos, Cynthia Briscoe Brown, Jason

Esteves, and Nancy Meister were all re-elected (McCray 2017b). The 2017 runoff mayoral race between city councilwoman Mary Norwood and Keisha Lance Bottoms highlighted the city's racial divisions, with Bottoms ultimately winning by a margin of approximately 800 votes (City of Atlanta 2017; Deere and Trubey 2017). In November 2018, Republican Brian Kemp narrowly won the Georgia gubernatorial election against Democrat Stacey Abrams. Other than a pledged teacher pay raise, Kemp's educational goals remain unclear. He assumed office on January 14, 2019.

Findings

New intermediaries and philanthropic coalitions align to support charters

Across our interviews, representatives of IOs observed that the political threat of the OSD in 2016 paved the way for alignment on Superintendent Carstarphen's 'turnaround' and chartering agenda. Ken Zeff, the executive director of Learn for Life, stated:

What the Opportunity School District did was, it gave some political pressure and some running space for APS to push forward on its turnaround strategy, and I think without the threat of the Opportunity School District, it would have been hard to move that forward. (interview, February 8, 2018)

The local philanthropic commitment to Teach for America and to several charter networks in Atlanta—KIPP, Kindezi, and PurposeBuilt (the 'partnership' school models supported in the turnaround effort)—are aligned with the priorities of the current administration of Superintendent Carstarphen. Whitehead (a subsidiary of Woodruff), Dobbs, Chik-Fil-A, Kendeda (a division of the Arthur Blank Foundation), Zeist, and Walton are actively funding these charter schools. The outgoing Board voted for KIPP charter school expansion (two schools, 1,100 students) at its December 2017 meeting (McCray 2017a).

Ferrare and Setari's (2018) research documents that Georgia CMOs received a total of between \$11 million and \$15.4 million in philanthropic dollars between 2009 and 2014, equalled only by Texas and Louisiana and exceeded only by California, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island (2018, 40). In addition to its support of individual CMOs, the APS Partnerships Office informed us that Walton also gave several capacity building grants to the district for:

- (1) Funding a third-party evaluator to study the district's turnaround strategy
- (2) Funding to support the development of data dashboards for parents, teachers, and the public
- (3) Funding to support a consultant to study and make recommendations for more efficiency for APS's transportation fleet
- (4) Funding to support consultants to help APS with the implementation of student-based budgeting

Rachel Sprecher, from the APS Partnerships Office, explained: 'It is unique for Walton to make grants directly to school districts' (interview, February 15, 2018). Allen Mueller, the Director of the Division of Charter Schools and District Flexibility for the Georgia Department of Education, described Walton's role further:

Walton is definitely the biggest, you know, brings the most money to town here. The way they fund ... they fund start-up and sort of implementation-level funding, which is still \$400,000 a school, somewhere around there. But for years, they've only offered that money for schools opening in Atlanta Public Schools and that has hugely shaped where schools have popped up in Atlanta. (interview, March 6, 2018)

Tim Cairl, Director of Education Policy Initiatives for the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, describes how the cheating scandal was a turning point for how the APS would partner with philanthropies following Superintendent Beverly Hall's departure and Errol Davis's arrival:

The Chamber itself took a very big step back on policy engagement in education after the Atlanta cheating scandal ... we wanted to get smarter on how we were involved in education. There was a 'cleaning house' that happened with non-profit and other partners for APS; I believe [new superintendent Errol Davis] really wanted to start with a clean slate. So when Dr. Carstarphen came in, she really had a chance to rebuild a lot of that partnership network almost from the ground up, in many cases. So when she came in, she immediately established the Partnerships Office, which is something she had had in some of her other school systems, and something that we didn't have here in Atlanta ... so that gave us a nice conduit, sort of a first contact for everything, rather than going always to her. It allowed her to really focus on the turnaround plan, and her more directly, personally trying to engage in the state policy. (interview, February 19, 2018)

It was also around this time, 2013, that the Georgia Education Funders Collaborative, a loosely constituted group of around 15 foundations interested in learning more and possibly taking action around policies that would move the needle for K-12 education, was founded. The Collaborative's goals are to educate funders on very complicated issues related to education reform, to have a venue for interaction on grantmaking, and to learn about state policy and ways to affect it. Elise Eplan, a consultant who serves as convener of the group, explained that there was frustration in the funding community after the cheating scandal, and an impetus to think about where the major philanthropic players could make a difference other than APS, at a time when Governor Deal was making clear that education was going to be a priority for him. The Collaborative itself meets quarterly, and the steering group meets monthly. The Collaborative also takes periodic learning trips, including site visits at schools. At first, when Superintendent Carstarphen arrived, the group wanted to stay a little bit 'outside the tent'. However, Eplan characterised the relationship as 'very good'. There was a feeling that the group of funders that were part of the Collaborative were interested in what was best for APS, and Carstarphen in turn gained their confidence (E. Eplan, interview, February 27, 2018).

After a Collaborative trip to Memphis, Eplan explained, it became clear that Atlanta needed a so-called 'quarterback' organisation that could do strategic investment in education reform. This led directly to the founding of redefinED, an intermediary organisation that raises money and reinvests it in APS around three policy 'buckets'—teacher and talent pipeline; parent and community engagement; and 'increasing quality seats', which in the Atlanta context means finding models that work and replicating them. The Executive Director, Ed Chang, is also involved in the Collaborative, but the organisation itself is separate from it. The subgroup of funders that founded redefinED were clear that it should not be under the umbrella of APS (E. Eplan, interview, February 27, 2018).

Appendix B shows a map of the structure of IOs and philanthropies supporting education in Atlanta during this period. We found that at present the IO structure in Atlanta is fairly tight-knit, but new entrants like redefinED and Achieve Atlanta that are connected to national funders signal a growing complexity in the policy space. A particularly powerful new entrant in the IO arena is the Westside Future Fund (WFF), a public-private philanthropic partnership. WFF was launched in December of 2014 by the Atlanta Committee for Progress, with leadership of then-Mayor Kasim Reed, following the announcement of the construction of the new Mercedes-Benz stadium. There were initial large investments from stadium owner Arthur Blank and the City of Atlanta of 15 million dollars apiece. The goal was to stabilise four historic but high-poverty neighbourhoods: Vine City, Ashview Heights, English Avenue, and the Atlanta University Center (Leslie 2016). According to its website, WFF's investments have four main focus areas: safety and security, investment in early education through job force training, health and wellness, and quality mixed-income housing (Westside Future Fund 2019). While WFF does not currently have a director of education initiatives, it pledged \$16.4 million in July 2017 over the ensuing five years to education initiatives on the Westside through a partnership with APS, with the major focus to be on STEM-based innovation schools, including the Hollis Innovation Academy (Westside Future Fund 2017).

National donors extended 2013 influence, but with mixed success

Despite the substantial influx of national dollars to CMOs, however, most of our informants stated that the actual outcomes of the board races could not be attributed to philanthropic backing. Two national groups—Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE), a D.C.-based group that supports Teach For America (TFA) alumni and former staff members to run for seats in local and state races; and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—each contributed to board races. Kandis Wood Jackson, a TFA alum who won the at-large District 7 post (the Southside), received money from both LEE and the Walton Education Coalition (McCray 2017b). The major issue in the Atlanta race, to the extent there was one, was support for CMO expansion as part of the city's 'turnaround strategy' in the aftermath of the OSD referendum failure (K. Zeff, interview, February 8, 2018).

However, receiving LEE money was not uniformly predictive of electoral success: in East Atlanta District 3, Michelle Olympiadis, a parent and real-estate manager who received AFT financial backing, defeated KIPP teacher Adzua Agyapon, who received substantial LEE funding (McCray 2017b). Several interviewees observed that old-fashioned, door-to-door politics and connecting with voters made by far the biggest difference in races that were still largely low-turnout. In terms of voter participation, Elise Eplan opined, 'I don't really feel like there was a lot of engagement with the school board race at all, so a few voters kind of decided on everything' (interview, February 27, 2018). And of the East Atlanta District 3 seat, another respondent told us: 'I don't think money matters ... Adzua might have had ... I assume that she outraised Michelle, although I don't know that, but Adzua wasn't connected to the community in the same way that Michelle was' (name withheld). Outside donors' influence had clear limitations.

Also in Atlanta, local philanthropies have funded a new collaborative, Learn4Life, which in conjunction with the United Way, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Atlanta Regional Commission, is attempting to focus the six largest school systems in Metropolitan Atlanta on regional outcomes

related to school readiness, reading proficiency by the end of third grade, and graduation rates (Learn4Life 2017). This regionalised approach stands as a counter-example of civic engagement to the more behind-the-scenes involvement of private foundations such as Dobbs and Woodruff. The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), with its long history of investment in regional projects, also did not invest in the APS's turnaround strategy, though it administered Kellogg grants to help localised APS school clusters build capacity to respond to federal mandates (W. Berry, personal communication, February 14, 2018). SEF also convened the Gates Foundation-funded Southern Policy and Practice Network, whose goal was 'to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders from states across the South to elevate concrete examples of what's working to improve education opportunities and attainment for Black, Latino, and low-income children that will impact policy and create systematic, meaningful change' (Southern Education Foundation 2018). Thus, the space for IOs and philanthropies is relatively new and rapidly expanding, and aimed at a variety of goals.

Concerns about national influence, opposition to privatisation

In interviews, we heard some indications of both concern about the influence of national foundations in the city and some signs of pushback against the privatisation agenda. One programme officer for a foundation that has funded a range of reforms to support the learning of the city's most economically disadvantaged students voiced concern that large national foundations, namely, Walton, were unduly influencing local funders by persuading them that they do not have the requisite expertise:

I would argue they're organising on the backs of black and brown families and communities, rather than authentic organising that works for and with ... organic organising, the issues come up from the people themselves. But I am terrified, as both an Atlanta native, and as someone whose heart and soul is in Atlanta Public Schools and its children, came out of and still go to APS, that some of these national funders, their voices are too loud and large because their portfolios are. And they are influencing other local funders whom they have convinced that because they don't have educators, that they don't know what to do in education, you know, because education 'reform' and all of those things have gotten so buzzword, a lot of these traditional family foundations have become convinced they don't have the expertise, so therefore we need to have this. (name withheld, interview, August 20, 2018)

As described above, Public Education Matters Georgia has also raised significant concerns about the increase of privatisation in the state, including both the expansion of charter schools at the expense of neighbourhood or community schools, and voucher legislation. The Southern Education Foundation took a role in opposing the OSD in 2016; on the other hand, it has not been a vocal opponent of charters in Atlanta.

Discussion

During this period, compared to other cities like Philadelphia and Los Angeles, Atlanta was still at the beginning of its trajectory of national philanthropic involvement in its school board politics; we found evidence of donations from Teach for America, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Walton Foundation. We observed that in contrast to other cities like Los Angeles, the political tone of the school board race in Atlanta was less rancorous, likely a function of the lower-profile nature of the race on the national scene

and the lack of a teachers' union with meaningful power. Yet this lack of a strong union presence is also precisely what may remain appealing to external donors in the future.

Atlanta is a compelling case because of what it can tell us about the balance of local voice and self-determination with respect to educational goals, versus external, national-level influencers who sees the city as ripe for chartering and privatisation. What we found was a mixed picture. The Atlanta board races were largely favourable to incumbents supporting Superintendent Carstarphen and her turnaround agenda; yet we simultaneously found that traditional neighbourhood-based, door-to-door politics were very important. (In light of Carstarphen's non-renewal, those board members who supported her may face political vulnerability going forward.) This supports the hypothesis that national organisations were not yet playing a determinative role in local politics. And a powerful statewide coalition mobilised in 2016 to prevent a statewide takeover of low-performing, mostly minority schools. However, we also found evidence of the rapid 'seeding' of outside groups in the city, notably redefinED Atlanta, a local 'quarterback' organisation springing from CEE Mindtrust's larger philanthropic efforts to efficiently fund TFA, The New Teacher Project, and other intermediaries (Barnum 2017). And there is not an emerging public consensus against charters from an achievement or racial segregation standpoint. Just as strong political agreements nearly five decades ago upheld the 'separate but equal' premise for Atlanta's schools, today's agreements with chartering entities similarly reflect an acceptance that privatisation can solve problems of academic achievement.

The alignment of the community behind the Superintendent contributed to this relative lack of a culture of political attack during the race. During this period, the Superintendent inspired the overwhelming trust of philanthropies and business interests that were seeking to support her targeted turnaround priorities, and secured a very high degree of political capital with her board. Some respondents suggested that with a different and less powerful superintendent, future Board members' sense of accountability to outside donors could increase – now a question for further study in light of Carstarphen's anticipated departure in June 2020.

Conclusion

Nationally, the nature of philanthropic involvement in charter schools can best be characterised as in a state of flux. The Broad Foundation, for instance, issued a letter in 2017 criticising the proposed Trump education budget for the harm its cuts to programmes would inflict on the public school system (Siders 2017). Our inquiry into the politics of Atlanta's board race revealed some of this ambivalence about control of schools. We found a civic and governmental mobilisation around the common goal of transparency and regional outcomes in the aftermath of the testing scandal, and alignment of philanthropic investment in charter schools that outside donors supported. While there are some indications of the lack of transparency of local foundations funding education in Atlanta, as Simon et al. observed in Philadelphia (2011), there are still many indications of locally driven politics and citizen engagement. While the city has become a chosen locus for national philanthropists to fund charter schools and to attempt to influence local policies, we also heard strong concerns about this transition, particularly from some local philanthropies. As Clarence Stone observed, Atlanta has historically lacked a truly progressive political movement; whether community and philanthropic groups resist or form counter-coalitions is a question for further study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices

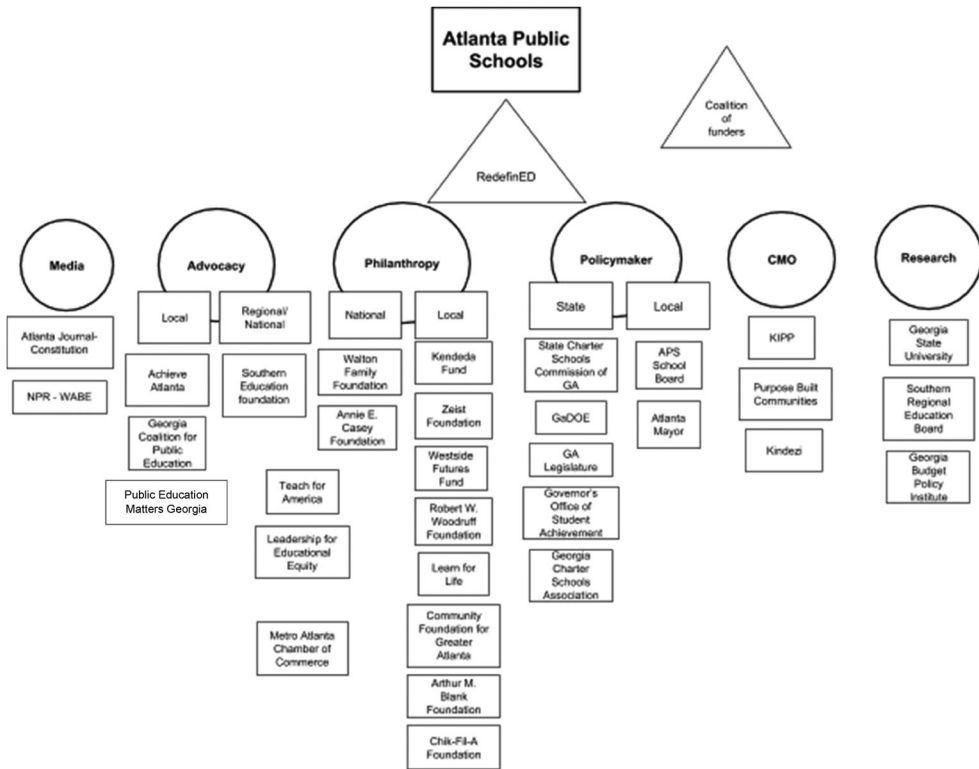
Appendix A

The hub and spoke relationship between intermediary organisations and foundations (Scott and Jabbar 2014).



Appendix B

Atlanta intermediary organisation network map.



Appendix C

Atlanta Public Schools informational snapshot.

APS Board of Education Structure	Elected School Board (9 members)
APS Superintendent	Dr. Meria Carstarphen (led APS since 2014; contract non-renewed in 2019)
APS Board Campaign Spending	\$716,000 (2017 board race)
Atlanta IO Sector	IO sector supporting charters: Strong IOs include redefinED, Kendeda Fund, Walton Family Foundation, Woodruff Foundation
City of Atlanta Leadership	Recent change in mayoral leadership from Kasim Reed to Keisha Lance Bottoms (both Democratic Party) No push for mayoral control of APS City of Atlanta may appoint Chief Education Officer
Georgia Governor	Brian Kemp (replaced Governor Nathan Deal on January 14, 2019)